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March 2007

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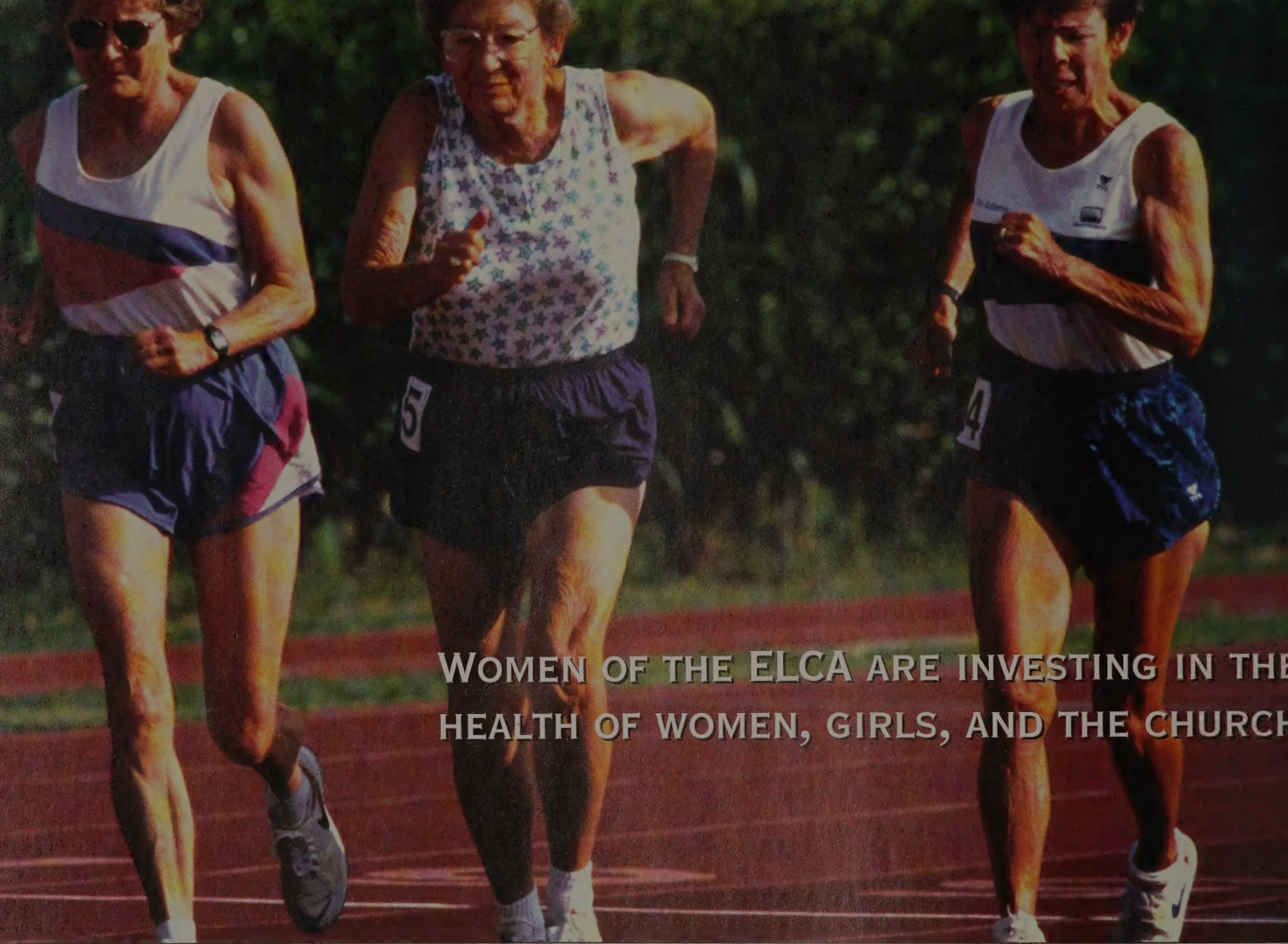
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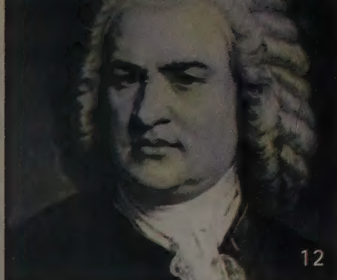
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 Managing Editor Terri Lackey
 Associate Editor Audrey Novak Riley
 Communications Director Deb Bogaert

Art Direction On Track Visual Communications

Cover John Coburn

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ALWAYS WITH YOU

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 02 MARCH 2007

God is present and active in the world and in our lives, even in the tough times. How can we discern the presence of God and share it—directly or by example—with those who may be struggling or hurting?

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Lutherans are celebrating around the world this year as we give thanks for 60 years of mission and ministry and look forward with hope to the next 60.

Kathy J. Magnus

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This month, we honor Johann Sebastian Bach, a devoted husband, faithful Lutheran, and brilliant musician. He was born March 21, 1685. *Mark Bangert*

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The signs we seek from God (and often receive) should always harmonize with our faithful desire to know what God really wants for us and from us. *Christa von Zychlin*

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God is present, active, real, laboring in, with, and under all that is, including the most mundane, joyous, and painful moments of our existence. *David L. Miller*

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In Lent we journey to the cross. We know there can be no rebirth without death, no Easter without Good Friday. *Julie K. Ageson*

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VOICES

Readers Write

Act Boldly for Health Bible Study

As I was traveling to Puerto Rico for my 30th high school reunion, our plane experienced a great deal of turbulence. We were in the middle of a storm and all the passengers looked very tense. When I opened the July/August issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* during that stormy flight, I truly felt the peace that passed all understanding. The articles and Bible study were as pertinent as they could be.

As the writers discussed Mark's Gospel that described Jesus calming the storm and telling the disciples to "have peace and be still," I realized that in the last months I had been experiencing storms of a different nature: moving to a new state, starting a new job, saying goodbye to beloved friends. I realized that it was precisely in the middle of storms that I needed to listen to God's calming words and that by being still I could hear more clearly God's voice.

I have to confess that I'm back in motion. But the insights of your articles and Bible study are still with me.

—Priscilla Meléndez, Hamden, Connecticut

We had a wonderful Bible study mini-retreat in August covering the summer Bible study sessions on health. Thank you so much for suggesting that [June 2006 *LWT*, p. 36].

More than 40 women attended, and all said they were so relaxed after the sessions. Our brunch was easy—quiche and cut-up fruit.

I can't describe enough the good things that happened. The fellowship

was great with some teenagers attending and a small baby with his new mother. Everyone enjoyed the day. Thank you.

—Eleanor G. Disselhorst, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Encinitas, California

Note: The three "Act Boldly for Health" Bible study sessions are available on-line at www.lutheranwomantoday.org/bible/biblestudy-sum06.html. To learn more about Women of the ELCA's health initiative, go to www.womenoftheelca.org/getinvolved/health.html. —Editor

There's Something about Circles

Regarding the November 2006 "Grace Notes" column: I was a little put out by the woman who wrote "get rid of circles; circles = old women." Does she realize these old women were young women who belonged to circles in their late teens and early 20s? We also met some elderly ladies in our congregations in that time in our lives.

I really didn't think getting together to study God's Word had any age differential. You are never too young or too old to learn. I have been a member of Lutheran church women's groups for 56 years, under several different names. Studying God's Word together has always been a priority in my life. Thank you for providing this each month.

We all have a lot of work to do, young and old alike. I just hope we have the stamina to keep at it. Together, with God's help, we can make a difference.

—Jean Nelson, Strum, Wisconsin



GIVE US THIS DAY

Boundary Lines

by Marj Leegard

Do you remember the

old cowboy song, "Don't Fence Me In"? When we were young, we sang it with more gusto than tune or understanding. We thought we wanted to be free, and indeed, we harbored the notion that we were free and unrestricted. We have learned a lot since those days. We do have boundary lines—and lots of them.

When we are very young, we chafe at the fences that keep us from activities that must wait until we are older. We can hardly wait until we are old enough to have that magical right to drive and to wear lipstick outside the confines of our tightly closed bedroom doors. But we find out that boundary lines are not erased by age, but only multiply. More and more, we find that we cannot do the things that we used to do with ease. The boundaries present themselves in our weakened knees and our fussy digestive tracts.

The perfect life that we planned becomes bound by the things that the world declares to be imperfections. Wheelchairs and walkers and canes and the electric cart running up and down the basement stairs become a semblance of freedom. Some of us are bound by the needs of family members. The new boundaries are unfamiliar and frightening. There are moments when we are sure we cannot bear them.

It is in those moments that the words of the psalmist speak clearly to us: "*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; thou holdest my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage*" (Psalm 16:5–6, RSV).

Or as we read in NRSV: "*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places*" (Psalm 16:6).

How can that be?

When a little baby kept crying despite all of our attempts to comfort her, one last thing usually worked. We snuggled her into a warm blanket and held her tight. That baby was happy for the boundaries of mother's arms. She snuffled a little, gave a tiny sob and a hiccup, just to remind us that the sorrow was real. You and I are like that little baby. We thank God for the Holy Wings that hold us, but often our gratitude is accompanied by tears.

We do not always think of prairie lands as being beautiful, but they are. The vast stretches of grass and grain reach silently toward an indefinite horizon. The prairie extends itself toward the distant sky. That is what we want.

No matter where the boundary line is, we search for the protection of presence. God gathers us into the love promised in Scripture that is delivered to us by God's servants—our friends, our pastors, snippets from books, midnight-remembered hymn verses.

Sorrow or the loss of the familiar may try to bind us, but we are wrapped in that everlasting love.

Someone may be waiting for you at a boundary right now. Waiting, waiting for you to deliver that God-promised, boundless love and comfort. Yes! Fence me in! 🌿

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

You Were There

By Kathy J. Magnus



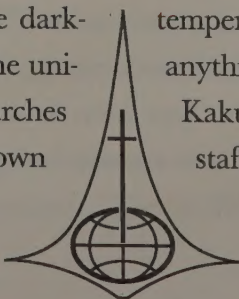
THE YEAR WAS 1947. The world was breathing a sigh of relief because the guns of World War II had fallen silent across Europe. American families were weeping with gratitude for those sons and daughters who returned home from service abroad. However, across the continent of Europe, thousands of Lutherans were refugees. They were without hope and in desperate need.

In 1952, Dr. Ken Senft, a retired Lutheran pastor and an early staff member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) working with European refugees, wrote: "The Lutheran churches of the world came with aid, gave assistance, and helped families become established in new homes all over the world. A bright glow coming out of the darkness of this great tragedy of the century is the unified and consecrated effort of Lutheran churches all over the world, united through their own agency (LWF) to meet this need."



THE YEAR IS 2007. Many parts of the world are chaotic and unsafe. The LWF is still caring for those who are without hope. The United Nations estimates that there are 20 *million* refugees living in camps across the globe. With more than 400,000 refugees around the world in our care, we are the second largest partner of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya is home to more than 80,000 refugees. Sabina is a young mother who lives in the camp. She fled her village when rebel forces attacked. She grabbed her three children (ages six, four, and three) and ran. They journeyed on foot and in fear for nine days with temperatures hovering near 100 and with hardly anything to eat or drink. When they arrived at Kakuma Camp they were welcomed by the LWF staff and given a place to live, food, clean water, cooking utensils, beds, and blankets.



As we sit around Sabina's small cooking fire in the cool evening, she tells how *you* dramatically changed her life. You gave her two hens, a rooster, and a pumpkin plant. She had eggs and, soon, baby chicks. The pumpkin plant has provided two types of food for her family—the fruit and its edible leaves.

After settling in at the camp, Sabina applied to the LWF for a loan to purchase two goats. She now has nutritious goat's milk for her children. Two hens, a rooster, a pumpkin plant, and two goats—the richness of God's bounty shared. You were there—as members of the Lutheran World Federation. You were there in Jesus' name.

THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the LWF this year, we're taking time to reflect on the contributions, changes, and challenges of these past years.

The role of women within the LWF has changed dramatically. If you look at pictures of that first assembly at the close of World War II, you see few, if any, women. Today, women are in leadership roles on the LWF Council, on the LWF staff, and as key partners in countless country projects.

Women have played important roles in shaping the LWF. At their strong urging, the LWF started a desk for women in the 1970s. With energy and commitment, women have worked for equal representation within the organization. Women pushed the LWF project planners to include local women in strategic planning in the villages, schools, and hospitals where the LWF was at work. Women wanted value placed on the contributions and perspectives they brought to the church. They strove to promote leadership development to equip women for full partnership in the life and mission of their churches and the LWF itself.

Here are snapshots of four ELCA women who have shared their gifts of leadership in the LWF:

ABIGAIL Z. HOFFMAN

Council Member 2003–2010 (Young Adult)

Abigail is currently serving as an intern for a congregation in New York.

The LWF has taken me to Switzerland, Canada, India, Israel, Palestine, and Austria, giving me the opportunity to talk, worship, and serve with Lutheran brothers and sisters from every corner of the world. I hope that the LWF will enable Lutherans to listen to one another's experiences and perspectives, allow us to be challenged by one another, and learn to recognize the face of Christ in one another. I hope that we provide a visible expression of the unity we share through baptism. I hope that we will be strengthened through the LWF to respond to acts of violence with messages of peace, to those who are hungry with food, to injustice with prophetic wisdom, to the ill with instruments of healing, to the marginalized with open arms of welcome, and to the suffering with comfort.

LOIS I. LEFFLER

Chairperson, Advisory Committee for Women
1977–1985

Executive Committee 1984–1990

Lois is a former executive staff member of Lutheran Church Women.

In what has been called the "pioneer period" in the creation of the LWF Women's Desk, I had opportunity to chair the advisory committee. Promoting systematic planning and giving leadership was important. As a staff member of Lutheran Church Women (LCA), I was able to bring expertise in planning, conduct leadership development workshops for women, and design exchange programs. A booklet of Bible study methods prepared for a workshop in Ethiopia was widely used and translated into a number of



Linda Brown, ELCA; Abby Zang Hoffman, ELCA; and the Rev. Susan Johnson, ELCIC, pause for a photo in Jerusalem during the LWF Council meeting in 2005.

languages. Together with an international team, we were able to offer a 10-week advanced leadership development seminar for women of the LWF churches. This experience equipped participants for leadership in women's organizations and the member churches. Women were ready, able, and willing to take on leadership responsibilities. The call for recognition of the gifts of women and for increased participation in leadership roles could no longer be left off the LWF agenda.

DOROTHY J. MARPLE

Executive Committee 1977–1984,

Commission on Church Cooperation 1984–1990

Dorothy is former assistant to the president of the LCA and executive director of Lutheran Church Women.

The history of the LWF's identification and acceptance of the gifts of women in its life and work has been a struggle. Advocacy for inclusive participation and for women in policy, planning, and decision-making roles developed slowly and continues slowly even now. As a member of the

first Advisory Committee for Women, representatives from four other continents and I were given the task of advising both the staff of the Women's Desk and the Department for Studies where it was placed. Following the Dar es Salaam Assembly in 1977 when seven new positions were open for women to serve on the Executive Committee, I was elected. We deliberated over decisions on priorities, the ecumenical task of the Federation, the nature of the LWF, and involvement in China, Namibia, and the Holy Land.

The call for women's participation in the LWF intensified. At the Budapest Assembly in 1984, several important actions, despite considerable debate, authorized a plan to assure specific increases in the percentage of women delegates at future assemblies, on LWF governing committees, and employed as program and supervisory staff. At that assembly two women from the Executive Committee (Bodil Solling from Denmark and I) were each asked to chair an assembly plenary session!

BONNIE JENSEN

Advisory committee to the Desk for Women in Church and Society (WICAS), 1985–1990

Project Committee, 1996–2003

As the WICAS advisory committee advocated for implementing the 1984 Assembly decision to ensure 40 percent participation of women in LWF assemblies, council, and committees, women brought their perspectives, attentiveness to human relationships and children, and their gifts for holistic communication through music, the arts, drama, and small group conversation. Women were changing the culture and decision-making of the federation.

The Project Committee is responsible for awarding financial grants to churches and agencies. As the committee pored over each project proposal, some of the liveliest discussions revolved around how clearly the commitment to full participation of grassroots women was reflected in the intentions and plans for the future.



Margaret Obaga, Kenya; the Rev. Bonnie Jensen, ELCA; Judy Biffle, ELCA; and Dr. David Pfrimmer, ELCIC, discuss issues during an LWF consultation held in Chicago.

60 YEARS OF MISSION AND MINISTRY

Lutherans are celebrating around the world this year as we give thanks for 60 years of mission and ministry and look forward with hope to the next 60. This month, the LWF Council will return to Lund, Sweden, site of the first Assembly, for a celebration. Women of the ELCA executive director Linda Post Bushkofsky is scheduled to represent North American women in Lund in her official capacity as LWF North American Regional Coordinator for the Women in Church in Society Desk. During the week of March 19, the Lund Cathedral will resound with hymns and prayers of thanks for these decades of work. The LWF is now 66 million members strong. And 66 million Lutherans do make a difference!

You can connect with the celebrations in a number of ways:

- Visit the LWF North America Web site, www.elca.org/lwf, during the season of Easter for daily reflections by those who work on our behalf in countless places of ministry around the world.
- LWF Sunday is October 7. Download worship resources from the Web site for your congregation.

- Include prayers for the LWF in your own daily devotions, praying that the work we do together in providing homes for refugee families, caring for those with HIV/AIDS, training lay evangelists, removing deadly land mines, providing medical care, and enabling self-sufficiency with micro-credit loans will indeed be for the healing of the world.
- Include the LWF in the Prayer of the Church on a regular basis.
- Support the ELCA World Hunger Appeal—30 cents of each dollar goes directly to the LWF!
- Support the LWF Endowment Fund with a gift that will sustain our work for the next 60 years. Contact the ELCA Foundation at 773-380-2970 to give a gift, or click the gift button on the LWF Web site, www.elca.org/lwf.

We began our work together when we saw a critical need and responded. Now, 60 years later, God continues to call us to respond to those in this world in desperate need of healing. 🌸

Kathy J. Magnus is regional coordinator for the Lutheran World Federation's North American office. She works in the Lutheran Center in Chicago.



CALENDAR NOTES

March

*compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including Evangelical
Lutheran Worship, Sundays and
Seasons, and Lutheran Book
of Worship, published by
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers
(www.augsburgfortress.org)*

This year, March falls

completely within the season of Lent. The 40-day season of preparation for Easter is ancient; it was well known by the time of the Council of Nicaea in the year 325.

4 Second Sunday in Lent

The second reading appointed for today (Philippians 3:17–4:1) reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven. What does that mean to you? You might ponder this in conjunction with today's Old Testament and Gospel passages (Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18; Luke 13:31–35).

7 Perpetua and Felicity and companions, martyrs

The young noblewoman Perpetua and the slave Felicity were catechumens in Carthage in North Africa when the emperor outlawed conversion to Christianity. The women were sentenced to be thrown to the lions. Perpetua's father pleaded with her to give up her faith and save her life, but she said, "We know that we are not placed in our own power but in that of God."

10 Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, renewers of society

Both these women were born into slavery in the United States. Tubman escaped with the help of the Underground Railroad, and helped 300 more slaves escape to freedom before Abolition. Sojourner Truth was freed when New York abolished slavery in 1827. She later discerned a call to become a preacher; many people found her testimony very moving. Both

women were effective activists against slavery and for women's rights.

11 Third Sunday in Lent

On Ash Wednesday, as we received the gritty ashes on our foreheads, we may have been exhorted to "repent and believe in the gospel." Today's texts (Isaiah 55:1–9; 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; Luke 13:1–9) reinforce that command: They tell of deliverance through repentance and conversion—both words mean "turn around!"

17 Patrick, bishop, missionary

Captured and sold into slavery, young Patrick eventually escaped—and went back to where he was held as a slave in Ireland. He spent the rest of his life teaching the Irish people about Christ; he daily expected to be enslaved again or even killed by resentful pagan nobles. But his mission was successful. He is still beloved among people of Irish heritage wherever they go. He died in about the year 493.

18 Fourth Sunday in Lent

This Lenten Sunday always has a note of joy. In Year C, the readings (Joshua 5:9–12; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Luke 5:1–3, 11b–32) are about coming home, reconciliation, forgiveness, welcome.

An old name for today is Laetare Sunday, after the ancient Latin entrance antiphon, "rejoice." In some traditions, Lent's purple is changed to rose for the day. That goes back to a popular Roman custom of at least 10th-century

origins, when people celebrated spring's victory over winter by wearing flowers.

19 Joseph, Guardian of Jesus

The Gospels don't tell us much about Joseph and don't give us any of his words. But we know that he was not only righteous but kind, and that he obeyed the word of the Lord whenever it came to him.

21 Thomas Cranmer, martyr

King Henry VIII chafed under the religious authority of the Pope for many reasons, but the most pressing was his desire to have his first marriage annulled so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. Cranmer was one of the clergymen called to research the matter of separating from Rome (and Queen Katherine), and the king was so pleased with his work that he named him Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533.

Cranmer's great work was the Book of Common Prayer. Its graceful English still influences the way we speak and pray today; in revised form, it is still in use as the worship book of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

In 1553, Mary Tudor, daughter of Henry and Katherine, took the throne and sought to turn back Henry's religious reformation. She had Cranmer burned at the stake on this date in 1556.

25 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Now Lent takes a turn: "I am about to do a new thing," says the Lord (Isaiah 43:16–21; Philippians 3:4b–14; John 12:1–8).

This Sunday is the beginning of the old season of Passiontide, when many churches would follow the 11th or 12th century custom of veiling crosses and images. Bishop Durandus of Mende in France

explained this at the end of the 13th century as an echo of Christ's veiling of his divinity during his Passion.

26 Annunciation of Our Lord (transferred)

This feast has been observed on March 25 since the sixth century. Sundays in Lent take precedence, so this year, we observe the Annunciation on Monday.

In the old Julian calendar, the vernal equinox fell on March 25. Some believed that this was the date of Christ's conception, birth, or death. Once Christmas found its place in the calendar, it was natural that today, nine months before Christmas, should be the feast of Christ's conception in Mary's womb, being made flesh, like us in all things but sin.

You might read today's appointed texts (Isaiah 7:10–14; Psalm 45; Hebrews 10:4–10; Luke 1:26–38) for your devotions. 🌿



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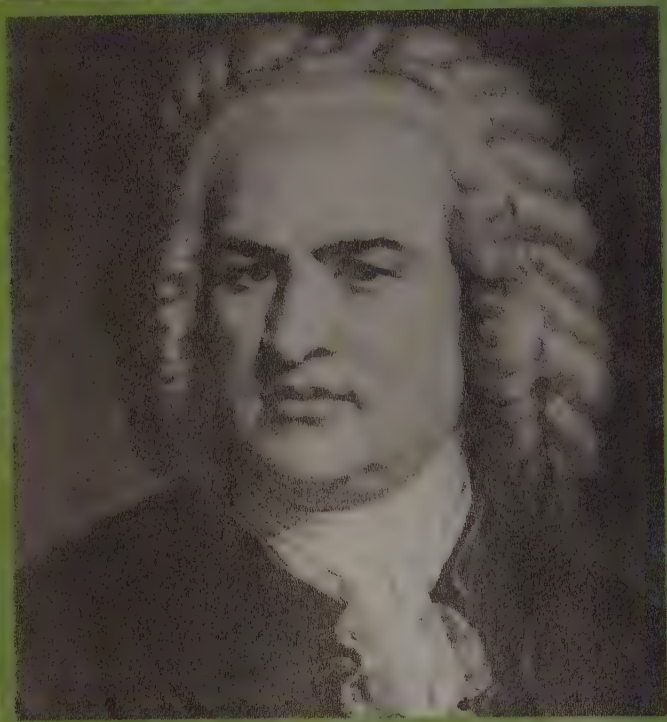
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J.S. Bach

MUSICIAN | HUSBAND | LUTHERAN

by Mark Bangert

In familiar circles, most people, including both his spouses, probably called him Sebastian, since a call for Johann would have brought forth dozens of men with the same name. We know little about Maria Barbara, Johann Sebastian Bach's first wife of 13 years, because she died in 1720, before much is recorded about his life. She was a part of Bach's "first life," when he was still gaining his stride.

It is Anna Magdalena Wilcken, Bach's second wife, who witnessed his vast musical output, his climb to fame, and finally his death, not quite a pauper, but not rich either.

A devoted husband, faithful Lutheran, and brilliant musician, Johann Sebastian Bach was born March 21, 1685, and so we honor him this month. Born in Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany, to an extended family of musicians, he was well-educated in Lutheran theology and all aspects of music. An accomplished violinist and singer, he clearly impressed church authorities in nearby Arnstadt when he was asked to examine their new organ. That same year, in 1703, they hired him to serve as their organist. He was only 18 at the time.

Four years later the ambitious young man moved to Mühlhausen, a larger town in Thuringia, where he married his second cousin, Maria Barbara. The couple had

seven children in 13 years, three of whom died in infancy.

In Mühlhausen, Bach served as church organist and began writing vocal music. Within the year, he was off to serve as organist in the court of the Duke of Weimar for twice the salary. Later his duties were expanded: He became concertmaster and, in 1717, chapel master.

In 1717, the family moved again, this time to Cöthen as Sebastian took on the role of chapel master for the music-loving and extravagant Prince Leopold. There his major task was to arrange a rich diet of instrumental music for the prince's delight. During the summer, the prince moved his court to the spa town of Carlsbad where he enjoyed the waters and all the music his dear Bach could produce. In the summer of 1720, while Sebastian was away on one of these trips, Maria Barbara died suddenly.

SECOND WIFE, ANNA MAGDALENA

Daughter of court trumpeter Johann Caspar Wilcken, Anna Magdalena Wilcken was a gifted soprano, engaged in the court ensemble as both singer and chamber musician. Her salary in today's currency was \$21,600 a year, while Sebastian's was \$28,000 a year. Near equality in salary shows not only the prince's enlightened view of the place of women but also the level of prosperity that Anna and Sebastian enjoyed.

The two were married on December 3, 1721. He was 36 and she was 20. Sebastian's four surviving children from his first marriage joined the household; they ranged in age from six to 11. Anna Magdalena gave birth to 13 more children, yet only five reached adulthood.

Even with her new responsibilities, Anna Magdalena continued as a professional musician at least until 1725. Sebastian said of her that "my present wife sings a good, clear soprano," and he tenderly coached her in developing her keyboard skills by preparing two books of music that he composed or copied from other collections. She also served as one of his chief copyists. Sebastian entrusted to her the task of copying the Kyrie and Gloria for the final "fair copy"—the clean, complete copy used in performance—of the great b-minor Mass.

Two years after their marriage, the Bachs moved to the city of Leipzig, where Sebastian became the cantor of St. Thomas Church and Director Musices for the city.

BUSY DAYS, BUSY YEARS

During their first five years in Leipzig, Anna Magdalena's husband was very busy. His musical output during these years is astounding: five yearly cycles of cantatas.

For nearly every Sunday of the church year and for selected feast days, Sebastian composed and

conducted a cantata about 15 to 30 minutes long. Several days before the work was due he would withdraw to his composing room to prepare the score, knowing that it had to be done in time for his copyists to get it ready for the singers, instrumentalists, and congregation. Next were the rehearsals, no doubt on Saturday.

There were other matters to keep him busy. He was frequently called upon to compose special music for the birthdays of local princes. And there were funerals for which he was expected to supply music. In 1724, he premiered the first version of the St. John Passion on Good Friday (another cantata was expected two days later), and in 1729 (by this time relaxing some of his self-imposed requirements for weekly cantatas), he launched his monumental St. Matthew Passion. Along the way he tested more organs and gave recitals in neighboring cities, giving up precious time for travel.

As cantor of St. Thomas, Sebastian was responsible for the music for four different congregations, some of which offered more than one service each Sunday. Accommodating Leipzig's 35,000 potential worshipers on a given Sunday was no easy matter. He would present a cantata at St. Thomas in the morning, then take his forces over to St. Nicholas for an afternoon presentation. On the next Sunday, he

did the same thing, but in reverse order. Anna Magdalena probably saw very little of her husband on the first day of the week.

PEOPLE'S LITURGY

These hours-long Sunday services had three parts: the first consisted of hymns, preludes, Kyrie, Gloria, lessons, and the cantata; the second was the sermon with its attending announcements, prayers, and hymn; and the last part was communion. Some parts of the service were still in Latin, especially on festive days. The cantata customarily began shortly before the sermon. Both cantata and sermon were delivered in German, serving as a kind of "people's liturgy" during the long service.

Sebastian's weekday schedule was almost as demanding as Sunday's. Every fourth week, Bach served as inspector of the choir school. His duties included waking up the resident boys (5 a.m. in summer, 6 a.m. in winter) and leading them in Morning Prayer. Toward sunset he helped them conclude the day by leading Evening Prayer. If any of the students were ill, it was his duty to visit them, just as it was his duty to make sure that the rowdier ones weren't "boozing at meals" and that the lazier ones weren't avoiding the long trek to the privy by urinating out the window of their upper-floor dormitory.

These responsibilities did not mean Bach could take a break from his regular daily tasks, such as teaching classes, private lessons, choir rehearsals, and, of course, composing. It is clear that Sebastian worked 14- to 15-hour days.

The choir school at St. Thomas had about 150 students, a third of whom lived in the five-story school building. Sebastian and Anna Magdalena set up their household in the same building in 1723. Nine years later Sebastian's superiors ordered a renovation: Now the Bach family's 802 square feet of living space would include a living room, kitchen, laundry, privy, maid's quarters, master bedroom, bedrooms for the children, and cantor's office suite. Many of the rooms had their own stoves, a luxury. Sebastian's second-floor composing room overlooked the Pleisse River and a park just outside the city wall.

FAMILY LIFE

Sebastian's busy schedule didn't leave him much time for correspondence or journal keeping, but we do have papers that show he made a point of bringing treats to Anna Magdalena, suggesting that their marriage was a happy one. In 1740, Bach arranged for delivery of a singing bird as a surprise for his wife, and in the same year he acknowledged her love of gardening by purchasing six rare carnation plants.

Anna Magdalena certainly matched her husband's energy. Their son Carl Philip Emmanuel later recalled that the house was like a "pigeonry," with guests and students coming and going, all participating in family music-making after meals complete with wine and conviviality. Sebastian's connections with the University in Leipzig provided his sons with extraordinary educational opportunities. The Bachs must have taken great pride in four of their sons who grew up to be successful composers.

Sebastian was proud to be a Lutheran. He considered his cantorate in Leipzig as "the will of God," and raised his voice in earnest prayer over a wayward son, asking God's help to "bear his cross in patience and leave his unruly

son to God's mercy alone." Like other parishioners at St. Thomas, he received communion at least twice a year and requested it at his deathbed. Supported by a private theological library of 78 volumes, Bach's piety shows most clearly in his music, both in the ample use of church hymnody and in his careful and pastoral ways of introducing hymn melodies as instrumental commentary on other texts. We hear a great deal of Bach's instrumental music these days, but in fact, the vast majority of his surviving music are church cantatas, each a moving exposition of deep faith.

Anna Magdalena was 48 years old when Sebastian died. His estate amounted to a figure somewhere between \$75,000 and \$125,000, of which one third went to his

wife. The rest was divided equally among the children, some of whom were still minors. Bach was neither wealthy nor poor at his death. Like many other widows, Anna Magdalena had very little beyond what her husband left her. When that was gone, she received some charity through the city council. But at her death in 1760 it was noted in the city records that she was buried as an *almosenfrau*, a widow sustained by charity.

Though poor at death, she died rich with memories of a most unusual home, hours of music making, and a devoted husband, gifts that for her were the mercy of God made manifest. 🌸

The Rev. Mark Bangert is the John H. Tietjen Professor of Worship and Church Music at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

TO LEARN MORE

Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician by Christoph Wolff. W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. The current definitive biography.

Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life in Pictures and Documents, by Hans Conrad Fischer. Hänssler, 2000; now available from Augsburg Fortress. A rich collection of color photos with informative commentary.

Evening in the Palace of Reason by James R. Gaines. Harper, 2005. A liberally embroidered but accurate historical novel about Bach's meeting with Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment.

Hänssler Edition, Bachakademie. Stuttgart-based Bach Ensemble conducted by Helmuth Rilling. This collection of

recordings contains the complete works of Bach. The performances are of high caliber and historically informed; the ensembles use modern instruments.

Cantatas, Bach Collegium Japan. BIS label. A growing collection of all the cantatas and other vocal works conducted by Masaaki Suzuki. Historically informed performances with original instruments. The conductor has said that his work with Bach was a great influence in his decision to become a Christian.

Glory to God Alone: The Life of J.S. Bach is a 30-minute award-winning DVD by Mosaic TV, produced by ELCA Communication Services. To order a copy or view on the Web, go to <http://www.elca.org/mosaic/winter02.html>



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Now you can listen to *Café*

While some young people are jamming to the latest music on their iPods, thoughtful Christians are tuning in to *Café*, the electronic magazine for young women of the ELCA. Now you can hear the main article by downloading it to your iPod through iTunes or listening to it directly from the *Café* Web site (www.boldcafe.org).

Readers of *Café* are young women who want to build community, participate in advocacy, strengthen faith, and strive toward enlightenment. Past issues have included articles on credit card debt, body image, spiritual gifts, hunger, gossip, women's equality, and more.

Nearly 5,000 people subscribe to *Café's* monthly e-newsletter and countless more read the e-zine by visiting the site. To learn more about the *Café* podcast or to subscribe to the newsletter, visit www.boldcafe.org.

Quilts and prayers connect

Like prayer shawls, prayer quilts are filled with prayer at every stage of construction. In her new book, *Fabric of Faith: A Guide to the Prayer Quilt Ministry* (Morehouse Publishing, 2006), Kimberly Winston describes the history of prayer quilts, offers suggestions on starting a prayer quilt ministry, and supplies prayers for the ministry. Stories of some who have received prayer quilts are sprinkled throughout.

A prayer quilt is a group-made quilt that holds, represents, and carries prayers, Winston explains. A prayer quilt is gener-

ally not quilted; instead, it is tied, like a relief quilt. The tying could be done by the stitcher who constructed the quilt, but often the tying involves lots of people, perhaps during a fellowship hour. As each knot is tied, a prayer is spoken for the recipient of the quilt. Since nearly everyone of every age can both tie a knot and say a prayer, Winston points out, a prayer quilt ministry can involve men, women, and children and is an excellent inter-generational ministry.

Winston sets forth the three "commandments" of prayer quilts. First, the ministry is about praying and not about quilting. Second, before the quilt is tied, the potential recipient must agree to accept the gift of prayer in the form of the quilt. Third, no one can buy a prayer quilt; the praying quilters are not to accept payment for the quilt.

Fabric of Faith offers a quick, meaningful read. Anyone looking to expand a prayer ministry can pick up this book and with little else but fabric, a sewing machine, and perle cotton, set out to make a prayer quilt.

Building ecumenical bridges

The ELCA is an ecumenical church. "Building Bridges in the Body of Christ" is a new set of bulletin inserts designed to assist ELCA members in understanding our five full communion partnerships and one interim Eucharistic sharing relationship. Download and print in full color or black and white and duplicate as many copies as you need: www.elca.org/ecumenical/building_bridges.html. 🌿



LET US PRAY

Fabric of Love

by Debra K. Farrington

A box, nondescript and unanticipated, came in the mail. It wasn't my birthday and I wasn't expecting anything, but I'm curious and can't resist an unopened box. Inside it was a beautiful prayer shawl, a gift from a friend a few states away. I had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis not long before, and this was my friend's way of telling me that I was in her prayers, and that God held me close just as this prayer shawl would.

In recent years, the shawl ministry has blossomed. Groups of people, often within congregations, gather together to create various items for those in need. Some groups knit shawls or caps for cancer patients who have lost their hair, while others piece quilts. As they knit or sew, they keep prayers for the intended recipient in mind.

Developing a shawl or quilt ministry is simple. Most congregations have plenty of knitters and quilters, and all an organizer has to do is put out an announcement and set a time to gather. Consider opening and closing your time together with prayer as a way of focusing on the sacred nature of the task.

Part of the fun of creating a quilt, cap, or shawl is creating one that will be meaningful to the recipient. If you know that the recipient of this shawl has a special fondness for the ocean, for example, you might use blue fabrics or yarns as a reminder of a place that brings pleasant memories. My own shawl is a sparkly off-white that reminds me of the light of God when I wrap it around my shoulders.

When someone in the group finishes a shawl, invite her to tell the group about the recipient. With the recipient in mind, invite everyone in the group to hold the shawl or touch the quilt for a moment and pray for the person who will receive it. Some groups make quilts for hospitals or other organizations to give away to anyone who needs one and the recipient isn't known to the maker, but the group can still pray over each quilt, shawl, or cap and ask for God's loving presence to sustain whoever will receive the gift.

Part of the joy of creating the gifts is in the giving, so whenever you can, take the shawl, quilt, or cap to the recipient yourself. Think about writing a short note about the item, and the hopes and prayers it conveys. Teresa of Avila, a holy woman who lived in the 16th century, once said: "Christ has no hands but yours to do his work today." In this ministry you are truly serving as God's hands.

Resources

Check out these two books for help in developing a ministry, creating patterns, and for prayers and other suggestions:

Knitting into the Mystery: A Guide to the Shawl Knitting Ministry by Susan Jorgensen and Susan Izard (Morehouse, 2003).

Fabric of Faith: A Guide to the Prayer Quilt Ministry (See "We Recommend" on opposite page.) 🌿

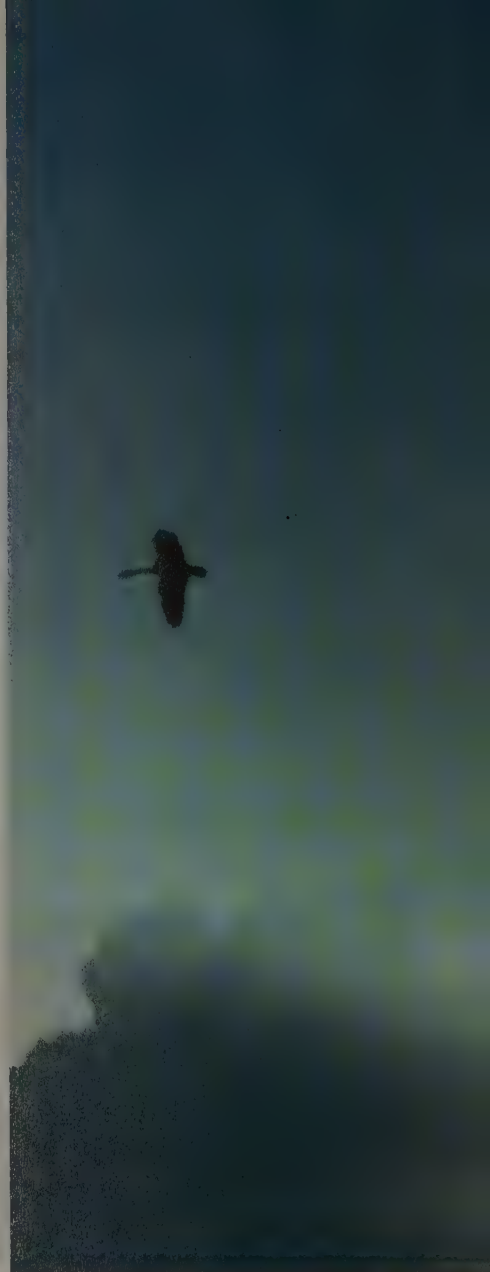
Debra Farrington has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Her Web site is www.debra-farrington.com.

Seeing the Signs

by Christa von Zychlin

WHY! who makes much of a miracle?
As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles.

—Walt Whitman, "Miracles"



I'll admit it, I've long been a devotee of special signs from God. It all started when I was a kindergartner in Sunday school. Mrs. Carlson gave us a lesson on Gideon and his fleece. She brought an actual wool fleece and allowed us to pass it around with our eager and slightly sweaty little hands as she told the amazing story of a man who dared to ask God to prove himself: "If it's

really you, God, then when I lay out my wool fleece overnight, make it wringing wet, while the ground around it stays bone dry." And God does this for Gideon—God shows him a sign! As if that isn't enough, Gideon dares to ask God again, "All right, just to be really, really sure, please make the opposite happen tonight: This time, keep the fleece dry and make the ground wet." And

sure enough, God did that, too.

Inspired by this story, I sprang into action that very week. Sharon was our neighbor's granddaughter, and she was just my age. Every other weekend she stayed with her grandparents. I desperately wanted her to be my friend, but I was shy and didn't know if Sharon really liked me or not. So I faced the hedge around our house, fingered



the thorns, and prayed what I figured was a Gideon prayer. “God,” I prayed, “if you really want us to be friends, send Sharon outside right now.” Not a minute later, I heard her voice singing in my ear: “Christa! Do you want to play?”

And that’s how it started. I tried out for a school play because I had received a sign to audition in the form of a butterfly by my window (I

got the part). I thought I should date a particular boy because he passed by my locker exactly between noon and 2 o’clock (the relationship went nowhere). I even chose my college, in part, because the brochure arrived on the day I had prayed for a sign (never mind that I had sent away for more information from that particular school just a few weeks earlier).

It all reminds me of the story circulating on the Internet: Not long after starting a new diet, a man drives by his favorite bakery and happens to glance at the array of pastries in the display window. He thinks that maybe it’s no accident that he finds himself in this situation, so he prays, “Lord, if it be thy will for me to have one of those cinnamon rolls, please create a parking

space for me right in front of the bakery.” And sure enough, on the eighth time around the block, praise God, there it was!

Indeed, stories about people looking for signs of the divine range from just plain goofy all the way to poignant and sublime.

HUNGRY FOR THE HOLY

On her way to choir every Wednesday night Audrey sees a little pile of flowers and candles next to the wall under the expressway. There’s a water stain on the concrete there that some people say is an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Rather than scoffing, Audrey recognizes in this gritty shrine a touching evidence of people’s genuine yearning for an experience of the holy. People can be so hungry for God that they start seeing signs in all sorts of unlikely places.

One famous incident involves a woman named Maria who was frying a burrito when she noticed that the scorches on the tortilla resembled the mournful face of Jesus—the tortilla was sold on eBay for \$27.66 plus shipping and handling. A sour-cream-and-onion potato chip with a similar “face” went for more than \$200.

Last summer in Pittsburgh, a woman with a bad back saw the crucified Jesus in MRI images of her spine. There’s no evidence that she tried to make a profit from her unique encounter, however.

Meanwhile, in a tongue-in-cheek move, the Churches Advertising Network (headquartered in London) recently began an ad campaign that includes a picture of Jesus’ face visible in the suds on the side of a glass of beer. The caption reads, “Where will *you* find him?” The ad has gotten considerable attention—but will it help people to be more aware of Jesus’ presence?

GOD SIGHTINGS

It is natural for humans to look for signs and physical expressions of God’s love and God’s will for us. I believe that God created us to long for a voice from heaven, to await a dream of startling clarity, to peer into everyday surfaces in search of Christ’s face.

And yet, as a Lutheran, I recall Martin Luther’s words on this subject. He wrote, “. . . we must in all things have regard to the word of God. To it faith must attach itself. Without it, either there are no signs and works of God, or else, existing, and regarded with the physical eyes only, without reference to the Word, they cause one to open his mouth in wonderment for a while like everything else which is new, but they do not profit the soul nor do they appeal to faith” (*The Sermons of Martin Luther*, “The Christian Race for the Prize,” Baker Books, 2000).

In other words, it is important that there is a consistency between

the signs I seek (and sometimes receive) and the true promptings of the Holy Spirit, as they are revealed in the Holy Scripture. The Bible is filled with “God sightings,” which embolden me as I look for evidence of God’s power and care in my life.

From Abraham’s stargazing to the shepherds guarding their flocks by night, the Bible is filled with stories that describe the skies as witnesses to God’s work and plans. Isn’t it natural that you and I should look up and see the wonder of God’s world revealed?

My friend Marit is a painter who is always seeing God’s artistry in the heavens. She told me that she was first startled, then awed, around the time of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when she saw a sunset that looked like an angel with spread wings. She even took some photographs to show me. Sure enough, with the eyes of faith and an echo of Psalm 19:1 in our minds (“*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork*”), why yes, the evening sky in the photograph really does look like a bright angel of power and hope.

When her friend died recently, Marit told me how she was profoundly comforted by a striking formation of black and purple storm clouds. To her they were a sign of God’s creation weeping and storming over the bitter fact of death in

this world. Her story reminded me of the morning my father died, years ago. As we walked out of the hospital that final time, geese flew in formation above us. They called out, a call of complaint . . . and hope. To me it was a sign, because my father loved geese. I believe that it was the finger of God beckoning those geese across the sky. Psalm 8 came alive for me that day: "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" (Psalm 8:3a, 4)

SIGNS AND WONDERS

As I grow older (and maybe wiser), I am less inclined to demand special signs and interventions and more inclined to see evidence of God's care and grace in the ordinary.

I know people who have felt prompted to call an old friend, start a new job search, or begin a conversation about adoption because of their dreams during sleep.

Should I be surprised that God might still speak to people through dreams when biblical characters from Jacob and Joseph in the Old Testament to Pilate's wife in the Gospel have experienced God's leading in this way? That does not mean, of course, that all dreams should be taken as the voice of God (*that* could have some bizarre consequences). However, when I reflect on an ordinary dream in light of

what God teaches me in Scripture, I may well recognize a divine message conveyed.

Most often, though, I now receive most of my signs from God in my church, before an altar made of painted wood and a baptismal font filled with water from the tap.

There I see the mother of three active children, a professor at the local university, married to a prominent businessman, who stops me after worship. She's been sending her kids to Sunday school for years, but she's not sure if she was ever baptized herself. She was adopted and there are no records from her early childhood. She wonders: Could we do it at our church, and could we do it soon? Is it too late?


"It's never too late. Any time is the right time to be baptized," I assure her, and I marvel at her hunger for this sign from God. Jesus' words from Matthew 11:28–29 come totally unbidden into my mind, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*"

This busy woman's urgent request becomes a specific message for my own harried life: "Remember, you are baptized! Remember, you are a child of God!"

Another Sunday, Samantha,

with her hands open at the altar, becomes a "secret agent" of God's word. Samantha has a genetic disorder, Prader-Willi Syndrome, which causes significant learning disabilities and an insatiable desire to eat. At the Lord's Table, however, this terrible affliction becomes transformed, for just a moment, into a laser-sharp awareness of God's gift in the sacrament.

Samantha fixes her bright eyes on me as I walk toward her with the freshly baked Communion bread. Her hunger, deep in her belly, compels her to practically snatch the bread out of my hand. I have no doubt that by faith, she is receiving exactly the Bread of Life that she so desperately needs. And I need that same miracle of Christ's presence in the life-giving bread and wine just as desperately.

Appearances of God? Signs and wonders? Marks of the holy? "As to me," (to echo Walt Whitman) "I know of nothing else but miracles." How grateful I am that God does not sneer at our desire for signs, but is generous with physical expressions of the miraculous. God binds them together with the Word, and they become extraordinary bursts of light, illuminating our ordinary lives. 

Christa von Zychlin and her husband, Wayne Nieminen, are pastors of Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hartland, Wisconsin.



Epiphany

ON 55TH STREET

by David L. Miller

THE SPIRIT BLOWS WHERE IT WILLS. SOMETIMES IT SWEEPS ACROSS THE CORNER OF 55TH AND WOODLAWN WITH A BEAUTY THAT MAKES ME WEEP.

The day was gray, but less so than my soul. Leaden clouds hung heavily as I trudged the block from my office to the coffee shop to escape my phone, e-mail, and a string of needy souls “just dropping

by.” By mid-afternoon, I had neither energy nor patience to attend to the passing parade that had taken possession of my schedule.

I took my familiar place, a corner table overlooking the bus stop

at this bustling corner on Chicago’s south side. Stirring my coffee, I hoped to nurse 30 minutes of solitude and respite before leaving to teach a class. But I knew the time would not be long enough to lift my



melancholy or lingering feelings of failure, a consequence of too little time and too much work.

Both body and soul ached for peace and quiet. But what I got was better.

Watching the corner, I saw a young man, maybe 30, standing with a small blond girl, perhaps four years old. He spoke intently into his cell phone while the little one bounced around him like Tigger. She jumped up and down at his legs, one hand extended high in a universal gesture whose meaning required no interpretation: "I want to talk."

The man finished and gave her the phone. Immediately, an ecstatic torrent of little-girl excitement spilled into the phone. The

man—her father I supposed—soon reached to take the phone, but she would have none of it. She bounced and twirled, blond hair flying, the soles of her shoes barely touching ground before again launching her airborne. Unleashing the innocent wonder of her soul, a whitewater rapids of words tumbled over her lips to . . . whom?

Her mother, I assumed. But since I could not hear, I could only know that it was someone she loved, someone who she knew loved her.

A minute or two passed, and she finished as suddenly as she had started. Snapping the phone shut, she handed it to the young man, and they walked hand-in-hand across Woodlawn. Halfway across,

she stopped, reached both hands up to the man. He scooped her up, plopped her on his shoulders and continued across, her little arms assuming a well-rehearsed embrace around his neck. She had obviously been up there before.

I sat transfixed. I had not heard a single word of their conversation. But I couldn't take my eyes from them, and I wondered, what are these tears in my eyes? A prayer bubbled from my depths: "Tell me, Dearest Friend, is this a vision of Eden or of the final fulfillment you intend for all things?"

I wept, having seen an unspeakable beauty whose Source is the Loving Mystery who is our God. I witnessed the One whose name is

Immeasurable Mercy, and whose pleasure is to show up on street corners and bus stops and most certainly in ecstatic four-year-olds.

Geography of grace

That afternoon I saw the living, loving Spirit of the eternal wonder of God, and my weary soul was lifted from self-pity and melancholy to life and vibrancy. When I left the coffee shop I was a different person than when I'd entered, and the coffee had nothing to do with it.

The ever-present Spirit of God breathed life, energy, and joy into my soul so I could continue the day with renewed and holy purpose, able to give my heart fully and lovingly to the tasks of the day. This gift came from seeing. I saw again that I live in the precinct of epiphany, the geography of grace, where God constantly labors to love me and all that is into life.

The epiphany on 55th Street revealed again the One who is Everlasting Love. That One, who bears the face of our brother Jesus, the Christ, seeks expression in every situation of our lives and in every spoonful of matter to reveal that you and I live in the atmosphere of God. We are enveloped in the all-possessing love of the One who is love itself. How different our lives would be if we always had eyes to see and ears to hear it.

But how did I see what many

surely missed? I am convinced that the ideas and images of God that so many people hold can blind their eyes and stop up their ears, leaving them unable to perceive the labor of God in their midst and in the depth of their own flesh.

So many people of faith imagine God sitting outside the normal processes of life. "Out there" or "up there," beyond the universe, God observes the human mess, seeking ways and places to intervene. God is an interventionist, choosing to step in here and there to accomplish God's purpose in response to our prayers and needs out of divine, unceasing love.

But this idea drains the divine presence from most of life. A god who intervenes here and there is not present and acting with power to accomplish the divine desire in the details of our living. Unfortunately, this god seldom seems to be around when needed.

We carry such childhood images of God as "up there" into adulthood, seldom imagining the intimacy, the nearness of God's immeasurable mercy. We fail to know this infinitely loving One, who labors constantly at the deep center of life to knit all the fibers of existence into a single harmonious whole, where all things are shaped by God's love alone. This is what God promises in our Scriptures, making life whole again, uniting all the disparate and

whirling elements of life into the love of Christ (Ephesians 1:8b-10; Colossians 1:15-20).

God in the daily-ness of life

The idea of God as interventionist needs to be countered by biblical stories and images that reveal God as all-possessing, all-encompassing Spirit (take John 3 for example), laboring *in all things* to work out God's eternal purpose. God is not only "out there" but always "right here," drawing us and all creation into healing and unifying love. We live and move and have our being in the constant and inescapable presence of the Holy One (Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 139). God is present, active, real, laboring in, with and under all that is, including the most mundane, joyous, or painful moments of our existence.

But have we eyes to see and ears to hear? Too often, the question of God's absence or presence is asked—or forced—by moments of confusion, grief, or great suffering. And if your controlling image of God is that of an interventionist, God becomes impossible to find—and harder to trust—when you turn to God in great need and wonder: Why doesn't God do something?

We can little expect to see and know God in moments of great need if we do not regularly attend to God's loving presence amid our daily life. We will not know where

or how to look. The result is a practical agnosticism that is all too common in the church. While we confess our faith in God with the creeds, we are haunted by doubt and remain unsure that we can truly experience God's presence in the daily routines of living.

We need to use the lenses our faith and tradition provide to see and hear the One our hearts most need. Nothing can deepen our daily lives more than a clear and abiding awareness of God's presence in the ordinary places and patterns of our habitation. Nothing can do more to infuse our souls with joy and sorrows with solace.

Always with you

What allowed me see God at 55th and Woodlawn was, first, a conviction that I live in the geography of grace because God is always working. Second, I recognized the divine presence because scriptural images live deeply enough in me to shape my vision, so that I might occasionally see what is right before my eyes.

I know God's divine purpose is drawing all things into a single, loving, harmonious whole, as revealed in Ephesians and Colossians and elsewhere in Scripture. When such unity of love, however small or imperfect, appears in my field of vision, I know: I stand in the presence of great holiness. For

here God's Spirit reveals what God is seeking to accomplish in every moment of time, in every heart, and in this and every universe.

I am reminded that this goes on—God is doing it—whether I see or not. But seeing it moves me into life and hope with a vigor and joy beyond any I can produce. When I see it, I can praise and give thanks to the God who loves beyond my capacity to imagine. When I see it, I am more able to give myself—my heart, will, understanding and abilities—to God's labor of healing the world, taking my place in this greatest and holiest work.

I sometimes encourage students to use their favorite biblical passages as lenses to perceive not just what God once did, but what God seeks to do in all times and places. One student quoted Paul's description of the "fruit of the Spirit" as a shaping text in her faith. Paul says, the Spirit's fruit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Our view of daily life and our experience of God's presence are transformed when we take these realities as a tool for seeing what God is doing in the world and in us. Each time I experience the patience or gentleness of another, or am blessed by their peace and kindness, the Spirit whispers, "I am here. And I am working to make and keep your

life human, graced and beautiful, no matter what else is happening."

Other favorite verses and stories from Scripture also can be used to develop and heighten awareness of God's presence. The Spirit uses them to shape in us greater, more constant mindfulness of the Everlasting Love who envelops us like the air.

"I am always with you . . . to the close of this and every age." In many and various ways, God has chanted that promise throughout Old and New Testaments. Jesus repeated it at the close of his earthly ministry (Matthew 28:20), and we continue to hold it fast.

We need to repeat and remember God's constant promise . . . and more. We need ways of seeing that enable us to witness that God is, indeed, near, with us, in us, working, amid all of life.

The Christian spiritual life is a constant looking and listening for the God who is everlasting love, who speaks in all love's expressions. Seeing the eternal wonder of God near and with us, we are made alive by that Loving Presence who labors in your life—and on the corner of 55th and Woodlawn. 🌸

David L. Miller, former editor of *The Lutheran*, is dean of the chapel and Cornelsen director of spiritual formation at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. You can see his prayer blog at www.prayingthemystry.blogspot.com.

ALWAYS WITH US

THE LENTEN JOURNEY

by Julie K. Ageson

Merciful God,

You called us forth from the dust of the earth;
you claimed us for Christ in the waters of baptism.

Look upon us as we enter these Forty Days,
bearing the mark of ashes,

and trace our journey through the desert of Lent
to the font of rebirth.

May our fasting be hunger for justice;
our aims, a making of peace;

our prayer, the chant of humble and grateful hearts.*

It is Lent. In much of the northern hemisphere the world is still cold and lifeless. Barren trees and brown earth wait for the lengthening of the days, for cleansing rains and the warmth of the sun. Fields are bare. In this desert season of Lent, Christians are invited to participate in dying and rising, in the mystery that in order to live, we first must die. Together with all of creation, we wait for transformation, for new life and a return to the life-giving presence of the God who is always with us.

"Return to the LORD, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love," the prophet Joel reminds us. And so we begin the Lenten journey, an opportunity to turn from those things that preoccupy and separate us from God's presence. Hungry and thirsty for new life and the steadfast love of God, we are reminded in Lent that hunger and thirst are divine invitations to God's presence. Lent invites us to practice the presence of God in the simple

disciplines of prayer, fasting, and acts of love for others.

So in Lent, we journey to the cross. We are invited to wear “sackcloth and ashes” as we confront the darkness of the world and in our own lives. We know that there can be no rebirth without death, no Easter without Good Friday.

Lent also invites us to return to the refreshing, life-giving waters of baptism—to join Noah and his family as they float the ark “out of bad times and into a freshly washed new world.” In Lent, we relive the stories of God’s saving acts, hearing with new ears the many ways we are Jeremiah in the cistern or Elijah despairing beneath the broom tree. We too are looking for deliverance from our own messy arks. With Noah’s family, we search for the promise that life aboard this crowded ark is not the end of the story. Together with the people of Ninevah, we too are called to repentance and reformation.

We hear again the life-giving invitation: “Return to the LORD your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Having lived through yet another season of death and darkness, we rediscover in the disciplines of Lent a God who is always with us, pursuing us with extravagant love. We hear God calling us to be Christ’s hands, Christ’s feet, Christ’s voice in a hurting and hungry world.

This Lent, may we be reawakened to God’s saving presence among us. Together with nature, may we be transformed from death into life, bearing Christ to one another and to a world in need of God’s promise of renewal and wholeness.

“O God, be our God, containing the seas, pouring water into a basin, washing us yet again. Make us into us, your body in the world, our feet washed, ready to serve” (*Words around the Font*, by Gail Ramshaw, Liturgy Training Publications, 1995; used by permission).

Julie K. Ageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

These resources can be helpful on our Lenten journey.

Forty Days and Forty Nights (Augsburg Fortress, 2006) by Gail Ramshaw is a collection of reflections based on the Bible readings for Lent. It provides a devotion for every weekday with a brief Bible passage, a meditation, a suggested hymn from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and a prayer. For Sundays it lists the day’s readings along with questions for reflection. This is an enriching personal or small group resource.

Quantum Grace (Ave Maria Press, 2003) by Judy Cannato is a set of Lenten reflections on creation and connectedness. Cannato gracefully weaves together God’s presence in nature and the cosmos with our human yearning to understand the mysteries of the universe and our longing for God.

Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter (Orbis, 2003) This is a remarkable compilation of works by B. K. Chesterton, Madeleine L’Engle, Henri Nouwen, Kathleen Norris, Barbara Brown Taylor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many others. Selections are organized around such themes as invitation, temptation, crucifixion, resurrection, and new life.

An extraordinary resource for exploring the many meanings of the Lenten journey is *Lent Sourcebook I and II* from Liturgy Training Publications. These two volumes include extensive collections of scriptural texts, quotations, images, prayers, poetry, and art.

Lenten Prayers for Busy People: A Forty-Day Retreat Wherever You Happen to Be (Orbis, 2004) by William J. O’Malley is a pleasing collection of readings and prayers from writers and poets including Flannery O’Connor, E. S. Lewis, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton, together with psalmists and New Testament writers.



BIBLE STUDY

HOPE IN GOD IN TIMES OF SUFFERING SESSION 7

God Is with Us in Our Suffering

by Terry and Faith Fretheim

TEXTS USED IN THIS SESSION

Joshua 1:9
Jeremiah 23:23–24
Isaiah 6:3
Psalm 33:5
Psalm 57:9–10
Isaiah 66:1
Psalm 139
Numbers 21:4–9
Mark 7:33; 8:23
John 9:6–7
Genesis 2:7; 3:8; 18:1–2
Psalm 36:5
Exodus 22:22–24
Zephaniah 3:17
John 2:1–12

Overview

So many people today think God is absent from their lives. Why? What is going on that contributes to that thinking? Might it have to do with the images of God that are presented? Might it have to do with the images of God's presence in the world that we as Christians often present?

Theme verse

Joshua 1:9

“. . . Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Opening

Hymn “Lord, You Gave the Great Commission”
(*With One Voice* 756)

Prayer

Who's here today?

As you gather today, be prepared to share your name and one expectation you have for this session, one burning question about God's presence you hope will be “answered.”

So, where is God? What is the problem?

It has been said that the parishes of the church are filled with practical atheists; that is, they have little sense of the presence and activity of God in their daily lives. For them, God's presence is a sometime thing, perhaps associated with a worship service or a dramatic or traumatic moment in their lives. Ordinarily, God is not part of their daily picture. In the decisions that people make, the relationships they develop, the jobs they pursue, God might just as well be dead.

Why do people so often think that God is absent from their lives? One might point to several things: for example, the increasing self-sufficiency that modern

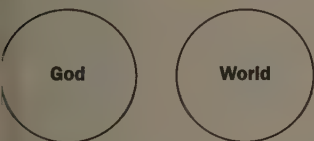
technology has brought, or the secularization of the larger culture that filters into our homes and churches, or the breakdown of family traditions and structures. Perhaps all of the above is true, but what if the church itself is a major culprit, with its stress on God's distance from the life of the world? Might the common image of God as a king be part of that? Royalty tend to live in remote palaces, removed from ordinary people's daily life.

This sense of a distant relationship between God and the world has been intensified by experiences such as the September 11 attack and natural disasters, events that seem to bear witness to the absence of God. To repeat another common image of God: "God is an absentee landlord."

- > *As you think about God or as you are praying to God, do you "see" God?*
- > *Do you consciously think about God as being "just like my dad," "like the queen of England," "like _____" (you fill in the blank)?*
- > *Do you agree or disagree that how you "see" God affects how you pray? Why or why not?*

Three models of the relationship of God to the world

Double-world image. The most common model is a double-world image. God has God's own world, which is other than the world we live in. Given that picture, we construct various bridges in order to bring



God's world and our world together. And so, for example, we sing songs such as, "He's got the whole world

in his hands." In such an image, God is outside the world.

In this double-world image, God is normally not around, but every now and again, God pops into this world—with a goodie or a baddie. This understanding

of God's presence is designed to give you a permanent crick in the neck. You're always looking over your shoulder and wondering: When will God pop in next? Why does God never seem to time these appearances for when you need help most?

Or we may take the opposite point of view: God is in absolute control of everything—micromanaging the world—and everything that happens is the will of God. But then, some people wonder, given how sinful and unruly we all are, whether God is a crashing failure as a manager.

Christmas image. Another common image is the Christmas image. In this image, God is normally off in God's own world, but, then, as the Christmas sermon often says, "In Jesus of Nazareth, God entered



into our time and history and made it his own." In this image, God's world only touches our world, just at the point of the

coming of Jesus Christ. All of the world's experience of God somehow has to be channeled through Jesus. But, without diminishing the centrality and finality of the Christ event, that event is not when God first entered into time and history. The Old Testament is all about the pre-Jesus presence of God in the life of the world. That proves to us that God is present in the entire world and God's presence and activity are not confined to the church and its work.

Single-world image. The Old Testament offers what might be called a single-world image. God is at home in this world, not off in some special God world. In the words of Jeremiah 23:23–24, God fills heaven



and earth. In the words of Isaiah 6:3, "the whole earth is full of [God's] glory." Even more particularly, Psalm 33:5 speaks of the earth as

“full of the steadfast love of the LORD.”

Such texts make it clear that God is not simply here or there; God is always lovingly here *and* there. God’s love is present wherever you are. This kind of language for God’s presence becomes the ground for a universal mission: Psalm 57:9–10, “I will sing your praises among the nations, for your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.” Throughout the universe, since time began, God has been present and at work in the life of every creature.

To use the words of Isaiah 66:1, heaven is God’s throne and the earth is God’s footstool. The heavens and the earth together are God’s home and God’s environment. Hence, any movement of God from heaven to earth is not a movement from outside to inside, but from one part of the world to another. God is not like a mechanic fixing a car from the outside. God is more like a medicine that works on the body from the inside. God is present on every occasion in our lives and active in every event.

Interpretations of the presence of God

In this segment, we suggest several ways in which Christians over the years have interpreted the presence of God in relation to suffering. And, in each case, we suggest how that particular theme might be understood in a more useful positive light. Psalm 139 is our basic text.

- > *As you read each of the following ways Christians have interpreted the presence of God, you may find it helpful to note your thoughts on each.*
- > *Which ones do you agree with? Why?*
- > *Which do you disagree with? Why?*
- > *Where do you think your beliefs come from?*

God is present everywhere: Psalm 139:7–10
Christians may think of God as the God of the Chris-

tian clan, so that God’s primary business is to look after Christian people. But Psalm 139 claims that all people everywhere experience God and God’s presence; for where there is world, there is God. Some people may, of course, not realize that God is present. But we can say this for sure: God’s pervasive activity has had an effect on their lives.

This has implications for how we think about the mission of the church. We need to find ways to understand and name the experiences of God that people have already had before we show up with the Bible in our hands and the name of Jesus on our lips. Perhaps an experience of unconditional love or graciousness delivered through other human beings can be understood as their experience of the presence of God.

- > *If you were a missionary or simply visiting down the block where God is not known or accepted, how would you talk to people about God and God’s effects on their lives?*

Is God more present in times of retreat?

We may believe that we must escape from the world in order to encounter or be truly present with God. So, we search out places of retreat or the practices of a certain kind of piety, trying to divest ourselves of the world. The Old Testament insists, however, that being with God does not require escaping from the world. It is precisely in the world that we meet God. Life with God will always mean life in the world, whether in this life or in the new heaven and the new earth. To be sure, God has provided for times of an especially focused presence, particularly in the life of worship. But those times are not to be understood as an escape from the world and its cares, but as ways God has promised to be present with us.

- > *Is there a danger in the image of meeting God in escape or retreat?*

> *Are there times when we need to set ourselves apart with our thoughts and worship?*

God is present in the little things, not just the big events: Psalm 139:1–3

We may associate the presence of God only with uniquely special events, such as the Exodus, the Resurrection, or Pentecost. Such events are certainly central to our faith, but God is experienced in more than just moments of intensity.

We may think if we are to truly experience God, we have to go looking for mountaintop experiences or miraculous moments. And we may feel guilty or inadequate if we don't have such major moments or cannot pray them into being. Or, we may find ways to make others feel like second-class Christians if they have not had such an experience. We need to remember the unrelenting Old Testament insistence that God is present and active in all the little things that go to make up our days. God is always present, working to rid the world of evil and to help goodness prevail.

> *What happens to us when we believe God is only present in the “big” experiences? Or the “mountaintop” experiences?*

God's presence in Bible times
and in our own time

If we think that God is present among us only in moments that look like God's presence in Bible times, then we might miss what God is about in the here and now. God is as active today as in biblical times, but the divine ways and means may be somewhat different. Our task is to learn to discern the signs of God's presence in our lives today.

God uses what is available in any given age as instruments in and through which to work. Thus, in biblical times, God had Moses use Egyptian medical techniques to heal snakebite—bronze serpent images

raised up in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4–9) and Jesus used spit and clay in healing (Mark 7:33; 8:23; John 9:6–7).

The means that today God uses miracle drugs and skilled surgeons. We need to name these realities for what they are: instruments in and through which God is powerfully active among us in our time.

> *What happens to us if we think about God's presence solely in terms of biblical images?*

> *Name some ways we (as sinful, finite creatures) could hamper the way God works through these modern-day means.*

God is involved in times and places that we may think have been explained in other terms: Psalm 139:13–16

We may perceive God's presence in the world only in happenings that have no other explanation; for example, we sometimes call a freak accident an “act of God.” If science and technology cannot provide an explanation, only then do we begin to talk about God. On the other hand, if the event does have a scientific explanation, then there is no need to talk about God. In such a view, as the sciences come to understand the world and how it works, God's presence and activity are crowded out.

And so, as we look at Psalm 139:13, recall that the process of conception, gestation, and birth is often explained in scientific terms. But in this verse, we see God was involved in forming “my inward parts”—in all the intricacies of the gestation process. It may be that medical science can be counted on to describe the birth event, but our biblical faith reminds us that God is part of the process.

At the same time, God does not do all the work in the world, including the process of conception, gestation, and birth. Indeed, we can resist God's work in our lives, and so things may go wrong, even terribly

wrong, in, say, the period of gestation or in the actual birth. Think of how some mothers-to-be misuse alcohol, or think about mistakes by the medical team, or the randomness of the gene pool. These factors, and others, could fly in the face of the will of God for this child, and God's tears would be the first to flow.

God's presence is not restricted to a spiritual or psychological experience

We may look for the presence of God only in the inner recesses of the heart, in some spiritual or emotional experience. As a consequence, we may concentrate on the inner-personal life and hope for some spiritual experience where we can truly commune with God.

But the Old Testament concern for the divine presence in association with the physical world reminds us of this: God is as much present and active in the material as in the spiritual (for example, see Genesis 2:7; 3:8; 18:1–2). God chooses to be present to the whole person that is you, not just to one part of you. We may immediately think of God's presence in water, bread, and wine, because of the divine promise associated with the sacraments. But texts such as Psalm 139 invite us to extend this understanding of the way God works to include such realities as a doctor's skillful hands or a mother's comforting arms. In this psalm we see God at work in the body, like a seamstress—a delightful feminine image for God—God puts all the patches of the quilt that is you and me together. Here, we see God at work in all those blood vessels and brain waves, making life possible.

God is present to all creatures, not just to human beings

We may consider God to be present and active only in the lives of human beings, and leave God out of the larger world of nature. To counter this misconception, we need to recover the amazing range of texts that show us God active and involved in the non-human

world. Texts such as Psalm 36:5, "You save humans and animals alike, O LORD," should remind us of this reality. And human beings have been made by God to take care of nature.

God is not simply present in the world of nature

On the other hand, we may claim that the presence of God can primarily be discerned in the world of nature. "Out there" is where we should look for God. And so we seek to escape from other human beings to experience the beauty of nature. But God insists that we cannot escape from people and the plight of human beings. We must commit to human beings who are hurting, show compassion to those in need, and face issues of justice head on. And if we who have been delivered from bondage forget the underprivileged and their needs, the word from God is very sharp (Exodus 22:22–24): "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan, for if you do abuse them and they cry out to me; I will surely hear their cry, my wrath will burn and I will kill you."

God is present in the worst of life's experiences: Psalm 139:19–20

We may choose to look for the presence and activity of God in things that are pleasant or inspiring. God is where life is going smoothly, where there is law and order, where there is sunshine. We may come to act as if God is not present in situations filled with strife or death. But the Old Testament insists that God is present even in the most heinous of situations, struggling to transform those moments into good. God is present and at work wherever evil rears its ugly head. The going for God may well get bloody, up to and including a crucifixion.

God is present at the joyful occasions

Finally, we may believe the opposite: that God's presence and activity in the world can be discerned only in

the midst of suffering and death. And so we will make every day feel like Lent. We may settle for a God who only frequents the world's trouble spots, and forget that God desires closeness. Look at Zephaniah 3:17: Notice how God acts there! Or look at John 2:1–12. God is one who attends joy-filled weddings and who has provided signs of Resurrection all around us.

In summary

Narrow perspectives such as those outlined above may cause problems for us as we seek to reach out to others. Where is your God? Is your God present and active only in well-lit, well-furnished buildings, or where only the conventional or the traditional prevail? The more narrowly we conceive of God's presence and activity in the world, the more vulnerable we are to disappointment or even despair when life breaks up around us.

- > *Take a few minutes at this point to write or talk about how you feel about God being in every nook and cranny of this world—of God being present in the most awful or disgusting of situations and events. (For example, God being present even as a child is beaten by an adult, a woman is raped, or people at war kill each other in the name of God.)*
- > *Many people suggest that Christians in particular have built a box around God that effectively limits others from seeing God. How do you react to that statement?*
- > *If you feel that statement may hold truth, how could we let God “out of the box” and present God to others in ways that they can understand and relate to?*

One important word to those who seek to reach out to others: Remember God's pervasive, constant, and caring presence in the entire world around us. It is not our responsibility to take God everywhere; God is already in every place ahead of us, preparing the way, already working for good in people's lives beyond their knowing or ours. Rather, we are charged to help people recognize the activity of God and give it its name—that name of Jesus that is above every name. Be assured that in all of your efforts, in the words of Joshua 1:9. “. . . Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Closing today's session

What a delight it has been to write this session. God is present and active in every nook and cranny of our being, our lives, and the life of every single person. What a great, marvelous, and loving God! Let us pray for the ability to give to all the gift of knowing this truth about God.

Hymn “Here I Am, Lord”
(*With One Voice* 752-53)

Prayer

Looking ahead to Session 8

In your opinion, what is the most likely time people offer a prayer to God? Is prayer viewed differently today than 100 years ago or in Bible times? What do you expect to happen as a result of your prayer? Do you think that your image of God affects how you pray?

And so, once again, cheers and love until we meet in the next session of our Bible study. ☘

Terry Fretheim is the Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. Faith is a retired staff member of Women of the ELCA.



CREATURE COMFORTS

by Cindy A. Johnson



Tom came to our church on a Tuesday night, a stranger to us that first evening, because he'd read in the newspaper that we were blessing the animals. His cat had been put down a month ago, and he was still grieving deeply.

He hoped to find in us a community that understood his pain. A truck driver, he'd found no one to talk to in the weeks since his cat died. Everyone he knew thought either that it was silly to grieve for a cat or that he should have gotten over it long ago.

My friend Melissa credits her dog with saving her sanity, if not her life. In the midst of a horrendous family crisis that involved not only emotional betrayal but also financial disaster, Melissa opened her doors to a dog who stuck with her day and night. She had a supportive human community surrounding her with prayers and comfort, but it was with her canine companion that she found the deepest solace.

Neither of these stories is unusual. Many people who grieve the loss of beloved companion animals do so in silence for fear that other people will think they're childish if they mourn openly. Others turn to pets for comfort in times of sorrow or trouble. Often that's not done consciously; animals seem to sense distress in people they know well, and respond by curling up close, staying nearby, or through some other response that comforts us.

It is one thing to know intellectually that God is with us in the midst of suffering, but God's presence is often made evident in the bond between people and their beloved animal companions, especially in times of need. The deep affection we have for one another speaks of

God's presence and love for all of us, human and animal alike.

No fear of "paw in mouth"

The domestic animals we invite into our homes often love us unconditionally, in good times and bad. And it is in the midst of those bad times that this unconditional love—the kind of love God has for us—reaches us most powerfully. When we are hurt or grieving, animals don't ask the wrong questions or say the wrong thing. Neither your cat nor your dog will say something like, "It's for the best," or "God must be testing you," or any of those other unhelpful things. Your guinea pig won't tell you that you're being childish or to just get on with your life. They simply stay quietly

CARE FOR THE ANIMALS AND THE PEOPLE WHO OWN THEM

Tom, who was grieving the loss of his dog, came to our church because of our program that cares for pet-owning parishioners in crisis. The original idea of the program was to offer volunteer pet care for parishioners in any family crisis. For example, if a parishioner had to tend to a family member in the hospital, a volunteer would care for their pets so they could focus on urgent needs. The program was so popular that we had a flood of volunteers—more than we'll ever need, God willing.

We expanded the ministry, and now our volunteers call on parishioners who have very sick animals or whose pet has died. We send condolence cards, offer pastoral care, and our prayerful presence, as well as a booklet of prayers for sick animals and for burying or memorializing pets who have died.

The program wasn't intended as evangelism or outreach, but our willingness to acknowledge God's loving concern for people and animals has brought many new people to our door.

Please contact me through my Web site (www.debrafarrington.com) for information on beginning such a ministry in your own church.

with us and allow us to feel whatever we're feeling at the moment. Like God, they are a non-anxious presence, and that is so important when we are troubled.

And when we are at our best, we remember that we, too, are called to be the presence of God for our animals. God made, loves, and cares for all the creatures, and called us to watch over them (see Genesis 1:28). Watching over our pets includes being present to them when they are suffering. A few months ago I found blood on the bathroom floor late at night, and went looking for the creature it came from. We have seven cats and a dog, so tracking each one down and checking them out can take time and effort, especially with felines. When cats are ill they hide, and my hurting calico, Gabi, was doing just that.

When we finally found her, we discovered that she had a bleeding sore on her bottom; an infected anal gland had burst and she was very uncomfortable. I spoke to the emergency vet and followed his instructions to clean her up and make her as comfortable as possible until morning. It was my turn, that night, to be a non-anxious presence, and offer Gabi whatever comfort I could.

A friend of mine found a way to convey God's presence and love to her cat as he was dying. She knew he didn't have long, and one night

she sat with him and read to him the evening prayer service. That night she told him how much he meant to her, that she loved him, and that if it was time for him to go, that was all right. Her cat died quietly in his sleep that night.

Plenty of scratches to go around

Animals also grieve when faced with loss, a fact that sometimes goes unnoticed. A couple of years ago, a friend had to euthanize his dog, Max. The dog's feline companion, Kit, wouldn't come into the house for two weeks. Kit and Max had slept next to each other on the same bed for years, and Kit mourned Max deeply. We would go find Kit and make sure he was all right, and spend time petting him, but we also had to respect his decision not to come inside so he could grieve in his own space, away from us.

Some people find the attention given to animals in distress to be at best sentimental, and at worst, an irresponsible use of our resources. People ask, "How can you worry so much about animals when there are starving people in [name a country]?" The assumption behind the question is that there is only so much love and so many resources to go around, and that anything we do to help animals takes love and resources away from people. I think Jesus argues otherwise. When the disciples wanted to send the 5,000

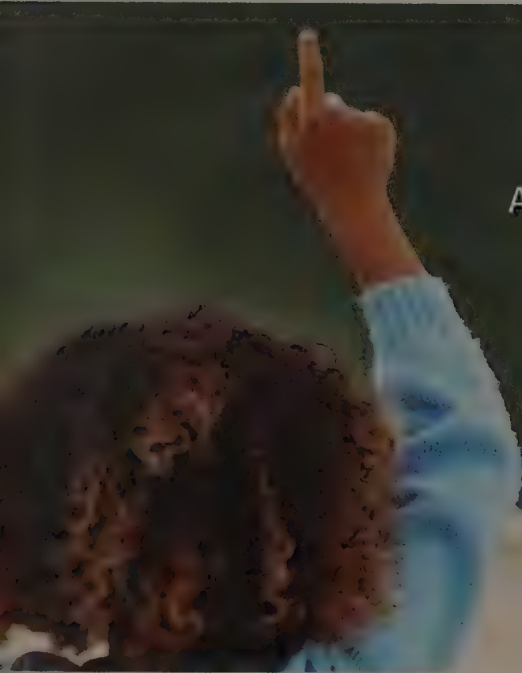
people away to find food for themselves, Jesus insisted that there was enough to go around. The disciples assumed scarcity of resources and compassion, while Jesus assumed abundance. My care for animals doesn't prevent me from giving time and money to organizations that help people. There is enough to go around, and then some.

Caring for one another in the midst of suffering is a privilege and

a gift. When we are present to the suffering of another person or an animal, we are a living reminder that God—alive in each and every creature—is present in every moment of our lives, as much on a glorious spring day as on the most troubled day of your life. When we allow others to care for us—be they human beings or one of God's other creatures—we receive the gift of God's presence as well. My cat's purr

speaks to me of the peace of the Lord as much as passing the peace at worship does. And though my cat doesn't understand the words, I hope my scratch under her chin does the same for her. 🌿

Debra Farrington is a speaker and retreat leader, and the author of eight books of Christian spirituality, including *All God's Creatures: The Blessing of Animal Companions*. See her Web site, www.debrafarrington.com.



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HEALTH WISE

Will You Need a Hysterectomy?

by Molly M. Ginty

Dee Queen never saw

it coming. Diagnosed with fibroids—two large benign growths in her uterus—she expected to have minor surgery (called a myomectomy) to remove them. But when she woke up in the hospital after the procedure, she discovered that her doctor had done a hysterectomy, removing not just her fibroids, but her entire uterus.

“At the time, I was 35 years old and still hoped to have kids,” says Queen, a computer programmer in Baltimore. “Having a hysterectomy robbed me of this dream. And it caused health problems that still affect me nine years later, including the loss of sexual sensation and bladder and bowel control.”

How did Queen lose her uterus? Before surgery, she says, her doctor handed her a consent form that said hysterectomy might be performed instead of myomectomy. Though Queen questioned the necessity of the more invasive procedure, she signed anyway, allowing her surgeon to take a radical approach to removing her fibroids.

After caesarean section for childbirth, hysterectomy is the most common surgery performed on women in the United States. Nearly one-third of American women over 45 have had one. But mounting evidence suggests that many of the 617,000 hysterectomies done in the United States each year may be unnecessary.

In February 2000, a study in the journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology* showed that 76 percent of hysterectomies are inappropriately performed.

“Though women are better off having a hysterectomy in many cases, patients can suffer from having this operation at the wrong time, for the wrong reason, and in the wrong hands,” says Dr. Michael S. Broder, the study’s author and an assistant clinical professor at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. “Even where hysterectomy is necessary, 10 to 30 percent of women have short-term complications and 1 to 2 percent have long-term ones.”

While 10 percent of hysterectomies treat reproductive cancer (in which case they are usually warranted), 90 percent are for more benign conditions: fibroids, chronic pelvic pain, persistent vaginal bleeding, uterine prolapse (in which the tissues supporting the uterus weaken), and endometriosis (in which intrauterine tissue grows outside the womb).

Since there are less invasive treatments for many of these problems (myomectomy for fibroids, hormone therapy for irregular bleeding, and surgery to remove excess endometrial tissue) and since the side effects of hysterectomy (such as blood clots, early menopause, and depression) can be serious, a growing number of health advocates balk at the fact that hysterectomy is an \$8-billion-a-year business and twice as prevalent in the United States as it is in other industrialized countries.

“Hysterectomy is popular because it is profitable, because its downside isn’t fully appreciated, and because Americans tend to view the uterus as expendable after childbearing,” says Dr. Marcie

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

K. Richardson, an instructor at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

"The culture of intervention in our health care system also makes hysterectomy more common," adds Broder. "Most American doctors are more comfortable intervening than watching and waiting."

If your doctor recommends hysterectomy, how can you tell if you need it?

"Ask lots of questions," says Richardson. "How often does your physician perform hysterectomy? Will the incision be vaginal or abdominal? What might happen if you don't have the procedure? And what is the post-operative recovery going to be like?"

Experts recommend actively seeking as much information as possible because this information may not be volunteered. According to a 2004 survey by the Hysterectomy Educational Resources & Services (HERS) Foundation in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, 99 percent of hysterectomy patients are not fully informed in advance of the consequences of the procedure.

According to the Washington-based American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, hysterectomy "should only be performed for medical reasons, and only after alternative options have been discussed and explored with the patient." ACOG also suggests that women get a second opinion when their doctors recommend hysterectomy.

If you do your homework thoroughly and discover you do need hysterectomy, health advocates say

you should opt for the least invasive type. In a minority of hysterectomies, the cervix is also removed, thus preventing cervical cancer. In the majority of cases, the ovaries are removed, to prevent ovarian cancer. But both these cancers are rare—and the benefits of keeping the cervix and ovaries may outweigh the risk.

"The cervix plays a role in sexual response," says Nora W. Coffey, president of the HERS Foundation. "And the ovaries produce hormones that a woman needs throughout her life."

In August 2005, a study in *Obstetrics & Gynecology* found that removing the ovaries during hysterectomy not only has no clear health benefit, but actually boosts the risk of death from heart disease and hip fracture.

HERS is lobbying Congress to create legislation that strengthens requirements for informed consent before hysterectomy. But in the meantime, women must advocate for their own health and make sure they get all the facts they need.

"When my doctor recommended hysterectomy for a prolapsed bladder, I researched the effect this could have on my body and asked for less invasive surgery instead," says Patty Adams, a special education aide in Soquel, California. "My doctor admitted, 'If it was me, I wouldn't have a hysterectomy, either.'"

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

For more information

Hysterectomy Educational Resources & Services Foundation
www.hersfoundation.com

Mayo Clinic: "Hysterectomy"
www.mayoclinic.com/health/hysterectomy/HQ00905



GRACE NOTES

The Sandwich Season

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



In our purpose statement, we agree to “support one another in our callings . . . and promote healing and wholeness. . . .” I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how we live out this portion of our purpose statement with women like me, women of the sandwich generation. Chances are you know several women who are called to care for aging parents while raising children. Is your unit supporting them in this challenging call? Has your unit done anything to promote healing and wholeness for these women? A version of the reflection that follows appears in a new life-stages journal we are producing. I offer it here, in the spirit of our health initiative, to encourage you to support women living as the sandwich generation.


Reflection

This is my life. I’m finishing some work at home in the evening and preparing to get in the car to pick up my daughter Judy from a friend’s house. My elderly mother calls, saying she’s having chest pains. I call 911, drive as fast as I can over to my mother’s, follow the ambulance to the hospital, and stay with Mom until she’s admitted and resting comfortably, about three hours later. Meanwhile, via cell phone I work out arrangements with my husband to pick up Judy and check her homework before she goes to bed.

I’m back home and wide awake at 1:30 a.m., so I spot-clean the bathroom. I’ve been asleep for only a few hours when my brother calls, wanting to know how Mom is. Judy awakes and com-

plains about a sore throat. The doctor calls to say Mom’s problems are likely her stomach, not her heart; he releases her but wants some tests done. By noon I’ve driven Mom home from the hospital and made her lunch. Judy can’t wait until her 1:45 doctor’s appointment so I drive her to the urgent care center. Three hours later, after her fever has come down a bit, we leave the urgent care center. Judy has strep throat. We get her prescriptions filled and drive home. It’s after 3 p.m. and I realize I haven’t had breakfast or lunch yet.

As I wrote to a friend who is also sandwiched, “I figure we do the best we can and pray that we set a good example for our children, so that when we are seniors ourselves someone who loves us can help us out too! Parenting has helped me in learning when I have some control and when I have absolutely no control. I’ve also said goodbye to any guilt that could so easily consume me, and focus instead on how my mother helped take care of my grandmother, seeing that as a guide to how Mom would want me to treat her were she not lost in dementia.”

Not every day is so dramatic, but every day brings new challenges. Our lives consist of many different seasons, and this is my sandwich season. Too soon my mother will die and my daughter will move on into her own adult life. Despite the illogic of it, I find myself enjoying this season. It is my life.  Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

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AMEN!

Another Way

by Catherine Malotky

You know, I suppose

there is some consolation in thinking that if our suffering is all God's plan, then, because God knows best, I can and should just tough it out. I ought not complain, but accept. But there are other ways. Emmanuel's ways.

Addy > The abuse wasn't physical in the beginning; it was just words. Words about how inadequate she was. He complained that her cooking was not as good as his mother's, or worse, as he could do himself. He insisted that she check in with him before she left the house, even to go grocery shopping. Then, the first bruise. Slowly, the violence escalated, against her and against their sons. Eventually her friends began to put the pieces together, and they spoke to her. "No," she said. "I made my bed. Now I have to sleep in it."

Melanie > She cringed when she walked by them. The football players always sat at that table, right next to the only door out of the dining room. The stares, jeers, and whispers were degrading. She hated being scoped out and rated. It happened to all the female students who were just trying to leave the dinner table.

Christine > Three years ago, a mere 12 months after the diagnosis, he died. She does not cry every hour anymore, but she aches for him still. They were such good friends. They had found in each other a kindred soul, a future. But she will never have that future. He is gone.

Beulah > The house is beyond repair. The great oak in the front yard is stripped and broken. Beulah and Frank hid in the basement as their life was whirled away

into the sky, pictures, mementoes, anniversary gifts, furniture, even the roof. It's all gone or ruined. They hold each other and wonder where to begin.

Job's friends would have insisted that all this suffering is from God's hand. And we might, too. Shouldn't Addy have expected such a thing? Why can't Melanie ignore her tormentors? Why does Christine linger in her grief? Shouldn't Beulah be thankful she is alive? Shouldn't that be enough? They ought not complain, but accept. It's all in God's plan.

But God showed Job another way to understand. God is present, not as perpetrator, but as companion. A mystery, but true.

Addy, surrounded by friends who love her, can come to understand her life and decide to flee for safety. Melanie can gather with other women and report the harassment. Christine can take her time to heal, supported by others who know the journey of widowhood. And Beulah can weep for all she has lost, and see God at work in those who come to help.

This is another way to see God—as Emmanuel, walking with us, calling us to new life, inviting us to see anew, suffering and redeeming at the same time.

God, do not leave my side. You know. You know what it means to live and to suffer. Walk with me. Encourage me to live and grow. Amen. 🌿

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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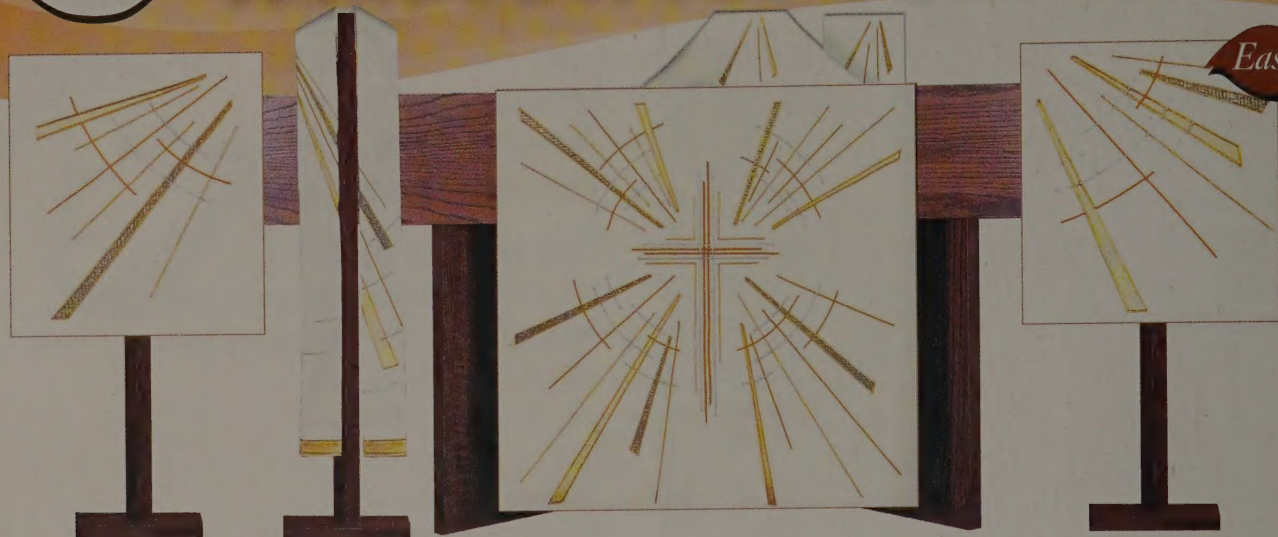
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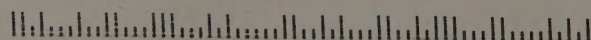
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